

A Master of Life

Thesis

Old age turns some people into couch potatoes who stop living and start merely existing. That will never happen to Ulysses, the great Greek hero who is characterized as a master of life in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem entitled "Ulysses."¹ As he prepares to leave on his last adventure and addresses his son and his mariners, he reveals his adventurous spirit, his desire to pursue knowledge, and his determination to live life as fully as possible until he dies.

Topic Sentence

Ulysses' plan to leave Ithaca and give over the kingdom to his son Telemachus is prompted by his spirit of adventure. He feels unproductive as the "idle king" of a people who "hoard, and sleep, and feed." These activities do not fit in with Ulysses' adventurous lifestyle. He does not want to spend his time gathering material wealth or focusing on his bodily needs. Ulysses is a man who "cannot rest from travel; [he] will drink / Life to the lees." He does not want to stop going out to meet life; in fact, he wants to consume life, to drink in—with eagerness and pleasure—all the world has to offer. With a sense of pride, he describes his past adventures:

Much have I seen and known,—cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honored of them all,—
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

Ulysses's adventures have taken him from the cities to the battlefields and have given him insight into lifestyles and political systems, but most of all, they have taught him about himself. Interacting with others and reacting to new experiences have helped him to clarify his values and his beliefs; therefore, he wants to continue his adventures so that he can enjoy all that life has to offer.

Topic Sentence

It is his desire for knowledge that drives Ulysses' restless spirit. In his eyes, "experience is an arch where thro' / Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when [he] move[s]." As he experiences new aspects of life, he realizes how much more there is still to be enjoyed and experienced. The more he knows, the more he realizes how much he still has to learn as new horizons present themselves. For Ulysses, it is "dull . . . to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!" He must continue his pursuit of knowledge to escape boredom; he does not want to rust out but to continue to use and polish his intellect until he dies. His desire for knowledge makes "every hour" exciting for it is a "bringer of new things." With a positive attitude, he anticipates each hour of each day and the experiences it holds. His goal is "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." To expand his mind, Ulysses wants to develop insight and understanding to depths never thought possible by the human mind. His thirst for knowledge has become a burning passion that drives him forward into life and new experiences.

¹Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams. 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987) 1950-1952.

Topic Sentence

Even while acknowledging approaching death, Ulysses is determined not to stop living. He believes that "Old age hath yet his honor and his toil." While he may not be able to do everything he did as a younger man, there are still deeds that he can accomplish before "Death closes all." Ulysses is a realist about death and its finality, but he is not yet ready to die. He wants to perform "some work of noble note" and "To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until [he] die[s]." With noble goals like these, he surely will lead a fulfilling life as he pursues his dreams "to seek a newer world." This is not a man who waits for death; this is a man who sails into life with tremendous joy and anticipation. While he admits that he has been "made weak by time and fate," he is still "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." His determination to keep on searching for adventure, for knowledge, for fulfillment is the mark of a man who has truly understood and enjoyed life and conquered death. What matters to Ulysses is not the destination but the trip itself. He enjoys all of life, and he is never going to give up his struggle to have it all.

*Restatement
of Thesis*

Thus Ulysses' indomitable spirit is truly inspiring. *His desire for adventure, knowledge, and total fulfillment reveals that he wants to be fully alive—not just "a name."* Through him, we can learn how to live life to the fullest now and in our old age. He scorns those who merely exist by saying, "As tho' to breathe were life!" In his view, life is an exciting adventure that ends only when "Death closes all."

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